

Message Text

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ACTION EA-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06
OMB-01 /062 W
-----111184 220104Z /73

R 212345Z FEB 78
FM AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4982
INFO AMEMBASSY CANBERRA
AMEMBASSY PORT MORESBY
AMEMBASSY SUVA
CINCPAC HONOLULU
AMEMBASSY AUCKLAND

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 WELLINGTON 00865

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

EO 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, NZ
SUBJECT: GIVING SOCIAL CREDIT A "GO"

1. SUMMARY. THE SOCIAL CREDIT PARTY (SC) HAS WON ITS SECOND-EVER SEAT IN PARLIAMENT. CONFUSING CROSS-CURRENTS UPSET A STRONG BID BY NATIONAL TO HANG ON TO A TRADITIONALLY SAFE SEAT AND SWEEP SC LEADER BRUCE BEETHAM TO VICTORY. LABOUR TOOK AN EVEN WORSE BEATING THAN NATIONAL. BEETHAM'S PERSONAL POPULARITY RATHER THAN PARTY APPEAL ACCOUNTED FOR SOME OF HIS SUPPORT, BUT MAINLY THE OUTCOME IS A WARNING TO THE MAJOR PARTIES THAT DISCONTENTMENT WITH THEIR PERFORMANCES IS EVEN DEEPER THAN HAS BEEN SUSPECTED. END SUMMARY.

2. CAMPAIGNING UNDER THE BANNER "GIVE HIM A GO," SOCIAL CREDIT PARTY LEADER, BRUCE BEETHAM, BOWLED OVER STRONG NATIONAL AND LABOUR PARTY CANDIDATES IN A FEBRUARY 18
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BY-ELECTION IN THE RURAL RANGITIKEI ELECTORATE. IN THE CONTEST TO FILL THE SEAT OF THE DECEASED NATIONAL PARTY SPEAKER, SIR ROY JACK, BEETHAM RECEIVED 6395 VOTES, A THUMPING MAJORITY OF 1401 VOTES OVER NATIONAL AND 520 MORE THAN HE RECEIVED IN 1975. JAMES BULL, NATIONAL'S WEALTHY, LOCALLY WELL-KNOWN FARMER-BUSINESSMAN, WON ONLY 4994 VOTES, DOWN 2637 FROM HIS PREDECESSOR'S

1975 TOTAL. POPULAR FORMER ALL-BLACK, J. J. STEWART (LABOUR), SLIPPED TO 1448 VOTES FROM HIS PARTY'S 1975 POLL OF 2263, A DECREASE OF 815 VOTES.

3. IN PERCENTAGE TERMS (1975 FIGURES IN PARENTHESES), THE RESULT WAS: BEETHAM 48.6 (36.3); BULL 38 (47.2); STEWART 11 (14). THE SWING WAS 12.7 PER CENT FROM NATIONAL TO SOCIAL CREDIT AND A MINISCULE 0.4 PER CENT FROM LABOUR TO NATIONAL. NATIONAL VOTERS OBVIOUSLY STAYED AWAY IN LARGE NUMBERS. IN A POSTMORTEM, BULL SAID THAT 2600 NATIONAL VOTERS DID NOT BOTHER TO VOTE. THE TOTAL POLL WAS OFF 26 PER CENT DESPITE GOOD WEATHER AND HIGH INTEREST IN THE CAMPAIGN.

4. TRYING FOR A THIRD TIME IN THE ELECTORATE, BEETHAM HAD BEEN RATED AS HAVING A FAIR CHANCE OF BREAKING THE TWO-PARTY MONOPOLY IN PARLIAMENT. THE SIZE OF HIS WIN, HOWEVER, STARTLED LOCAL OBSERVERS. NEVERTHELESS, DECREASES IN SUPPORT FOR THE MAJOR PARTIES, PLUS NON-VOTING, RATHER THAN AN INCREASE IN SOCIAL CREDIT FOLLOWING MAINLY ACCOUNT FOR THE OUTCOME. THOSE WHO DID VOTE APPARENTLY TOOK THE OPPORTUNITY OF A "THROW AWAY" ELECTION, ONE WHICH COULD NOT DISTURB THE PARLIAMENTARY BALANCE, TO SHOW THEIR DISENCHANTMENT WITH BOTH NATIONAL AND LABOUR AND TO GIVE SOCIAL CREDIT'S PERSONABLE LEADER A "GO" IN PARLIAMENT. BEETHAM
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CAMPAIGNED VIGOROUSLY, PLAYING DOWN SOME OF THE "FUNNY MONEY" UNORTHODOXY OF SOCIAL CREDITISM AND CONCENTRATING ON THE PLIGHT OF THE FARMER, THE TARNISHED IMAGE OF PARLIAMENT, AND THE SORRY STATE OF THE ECONOMY, ALL OF WHICH APPEALED TO THE "PLAGUE ON BOTH YOUR HOUSES" THINKING OF MANY VOTERS. HE APPARENTLY ALSO GAINED SOME VOTES FROM LABOUR ON THE BASIS OF HIS STAND ON ABORTION LEGISLATION.

5. BOTH NATIONAL AND LABOUR SAW RANGITIKEI AS AN IMPORTANT TEST OF SENTIMENT LEADING UP TO THE NOVEMBER GENERAL ELECTIONS. EACH TROTTED OUT ITS MAJOR PERSONALITIES AND HORDES OF PARTY WORKERS. NATIONAL TRIED TO SWEETEN ITS APPEAL FOR PARTY LOYALTY BY SUCH BREAD-AND-BUTTER LARGESSE AS THE RETURN TO FARMERS OF MONEY HELD IN THE WOOL RETENTION SCHEME, EASIER HOME LOAN TERMS, AND A GRANT FOR A NEW AND LONG OVERDUE COURTHOUSE IN THE ELECTORATE. LABOUR USED THE BY-ELECTION TO TEST THE APPEAL OF POLICIES IT HAS BEEN DEVELOPING FOR NOVEMBER. ITS STRESS ON LOWER INTEREST RATES, TAX CUTS, REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT, AND HOME FINANCING, HOWEVER, GENERATED LITTLE VOTER INTEREST.

6. WHETHER BEETHAM CAN HOLD ON TO HIS NEWLY WON SEAT IN THE NOVEMBER GENERAL ELECTION IS PROBLEMATIC. THE BATTLE WILL BE FOUGHT WITH NEW ELECTORATE BOUNDARIES AND HIS OPPONENT WILL BE MINISTER OF EDUCATION LESLIE GANDAR. MUCH WILL DEPEND ON HOW BEETHAM PERFORMS IN PARLIAMENT.

7. BEYOND BEETHAM'S PERSONAL FATE (AND THAT OF HIS PARTY), THE LARGER QUESTION IS WHAT THE BY-ELECTION SHOWS

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 02 WELLINGTON 00865

ABOUT TRENDS IN THE NEW ZEALAND BODY POLITIC. IN PARLIAMENT, BEETHAM PROMISES TO BE A FOCUS FOR DISCONTENT WITH THE MAJOR PARTIES EVEN IF HIS TENURE TURNS OUT TO BE ONLY A NINE-MONTH WONDER. BUT THE PUBLIC IS NOT TURNING TOWARD A NEW ALTERNATIVE; IT IS TURNING AWAY FROM OLD SOLUTIONS. FOR THE FOURTH SUCCESSIVE BY-ELECTION, NATIONAL'S SHARE OF THE VOTE HAS FALLEN. LABOUR SLIPPED EVEN FURTHER. ABSENTEEISM AND FRUSTRATION COULD BECOME IMPORTANT, EVEN DECISIVE, FACTORS IN NOVEMBER'S NATIONAL POLL. STILL, NATIONAL REMAINS AHEAD, IF ONLY BY DEFAULT. HEALY

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